Slide 2 – Religious and Theologically Motivated Terrorism, Part 1
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Slide 3 – Introduction & Module Objectives
The next two segments build on the previous modules on Social Identity Theory, supplementing your theoretical understanding of terrorism and clarifying the correlation between developing social identities and religious and theologically motivated terrorism and terrorist groups. Additionally, they address the role of religious and theological terrorism in contemporary society and demonstrate how it pertains to the counterterrorism field. After completing this series of modules, you should be able to:

• See how religion is used as a strong in-group designation in organizations using religious authority to justify their terrorist/extremist actions;
• Understand the importance of properly recognizing terrorist motivation when giving an assessment or analysis of a terrorist group or attack;
• Recognize the difference between religious and theologically motivated violence; Give historical and contemporary examples of religious and theologically motivated terrorist groups
• Give contemporary groups or issues proper historical context;
• Identify major religious traditions and sects that have provided motivation for terrorism in the modern age;
• Identify some of the most influential authors on the subject.

Slide 4 – The Religious Terrorist Threat
Anyone who has traveled, watched TV or listened to the radio in recent years knows that terrorism has radically impacted American society. Religious terrorism in particular has become an important national security issue, as many of the most recognizable terrorist attacks in the past 15 years seem to have been motivated by religion or theology. It is generally argued that the 9/11 attacks were motivated by a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. As members of the counterterrorism community, we must ask ourselves: has religious extremism become a serious, violent threat to the US? Or is the problem of religious terrorism not quite so simple?

Many agree that religious terrorism is one of the most significant forms of political violence being practiced today, but few know what it actually is and how it differs from other motivations behind sub-national political violence—for example, the extreme right or left, or single-issue motivations.

Try explaining to someone else three elements of an important terrorist attack involving religion and theology. Without a solid framework for understanding and analyzing religious or theological motivation, you probably will find this task difficult. One important goal of this module (and the course as a whole) is to provide you with the framework necessary for explaining and analyzing religious or theological terrorism.

You should have already viewed and completed the modules on Social Identity Theory. These modules will help you further understand the role of religious and theologically motivated groups as they carry out extreme or terrorist actions.
Slide 5 – The Balance of Power

First it is important to understand how relationships between different powers work at both the domestic and international level. Much of this understanding relies on the “Balance of Power” concept. According to the Balance of Power concept, overall stability is a result of competing forces. For example, when there is a comparable ability to exert national will in a given region, states balance against each other. On the global level, national systems—for example, NATO countries and the Soviet Bloc countries during the Cold War—balanced against each other, contributing to overall peace. One might argue that there were plenty of conflicts related to the Soviet and NATO countries—but the massive nuclear war feared between these competing systems was ‘balanced’ by each major bloc.

While threats from traditional state competitors such as China and Russia are still a serious national security concern, the United States has combined many aspects of national power, including coordinated diplomatic efforts, information capabilities, military superiority, economic sanctions, the ability to financially support counter-efforts, intelligence collection and effective analysis and the role of law enforcement, in order to balance these threats and prevent direct armed attack.

These seven elements of national power are sometimes referred to as DIMEFIL—Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence and Law Enforcement.

A nation’s power is no longer assumed to be contained in its military might alone. The ability to effectively negotiate through diplomatic channels, to access and put out critical information surrounding a given incident or issue and to bring economic pressure to bear, while financial superiority and intelligence collection further aid law enforcement—as well as military effort—are all considered alongside the more traditional calculus of a nation’s ability to project military might around the globe. These non-military kinds of power—sometimes called soft power—are used independently and in conjunction with other forms of power to more effectively coerce nations into accepting the US’s foreign policy on a given situation.

Slide 6 – The Balance of Power (continued)

Terrorist groups, on the other hand, rarely have the ability to balance against an entire nation, especially one as powerful as the United States. Sub-national groups do not have the government infrastructure related to diplomacy or economics, nor the traditional military capabilities normally associated with a nation. Occasionally in some failed states, sub-national groups have used the government’s lack of infrastructure to operate in a safe haven which allows them greater ease to plan attacks, as al-Qaeda did in Afghanistan prior to the attacks of 9/11. But even in this safe haven situation, the sub-national group is subservient to the ruling government. Violent sub-national groups must therefore overcome these balance of power constraints by attacking in an asymmetrical fashion; that is, by employing unorthodox or non-traditional military methods of attack.

While terrorist groups lack traditional military might, their small size can be seen as an advantage because they are more difficult to retaliate against. Following an attack, terrorists can simply fade back into the community from which they came, making it difficult for great powers like the US to exert the full measure of their military capability in a situation that may appear to the casual observer, appropriate for military response alone. At times, terrorist organizations actually desire a purely military response to their violence in the hopes that the nation state’s actions will appear as if they are unjust or targeting those outside of the responsible group. This type of overwhelming action and response allows the terrorist organization to point to what has been called “collateral damage” in the hopes of gaining public sympathy. No population sees the wounding or killing of its innocents as “collateral,” and sympathies can quickly swing toward supporting a group the population would not necessarily side with, had the damage never occurred.

Slide 7 – Origins and “New” Terrorism

What many have called “religious terrorism” is nothing new. In 1984, the long-time scholar of religion and terrorism, David C. Rapoport, accurately identified the importance of religion as a terrorist motivation throughout history. Rapoport has argued that until the advent of modern terrorism (generally seen as beginning in 1968), religion was seen as the only effective ideological support for terror attacks.

For instance, in the first century, a group known as Jewish Zealots or Sicarii (roughly translated as “dagger wielders”) fought against the Romans in Palestine for the right to practice their religion freely and in the hope of ushering in the advent of the Messiah and the attending apocalyptic confrontation they believed would rid them of Roman rule.
Though the Roman military was far superior to the Jewish contingent, the Zealots’ asymmetric strategy remained active during the 25 years prior to the Roman destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 AD. The terroristic attacks of the group did lead to a more open rebellion or insurgency from 66-70AD—but the hoped-for apocalypse did not materialize, and the traditional military might of the Romans held out in the end.

Other early religious terrorists include the Muslim Assassins who targeted Christian crusaders between AD 1090 and 1272, utilizing tactics that sometimes ended as suicide missions long before the contemporary focus on that tactic began. These examples demonstrate both that smaller forces have used asymmetrical tactics effectively against traditional powers for many years and that terrorist actions have sometimes been motivated by religion or theology. Thus, religious motivation must be seriously considered when approaching counterterrorism.

In today’s terrorism studies community, an idea known as “new terrorism” is being debated. One of the main features of this idea—upon which many terrorism scholars can agree—is the role that religion and theology plays in the tactics of these “new terrorists.” For instance, Walter Laqueur has argued that religion has played an important role in not only the often-discussed Muslim connection, but also in the rise in violence in Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism. At the same time Mark Juergensmeyer explains the same argument to the role religion and theology has in modern Sikhism and Buddhism.

**Slide 8 – Motivations: From Political to Religious**

During the "Modern Age of Terror" (roughly from 1968 through the early 1990s), terrorist groups were primarily ethno-nationalist or secular. However, in 1993, Dr. Bruce Hoffman, a notable terrorism specialist, identified a shift away from these traditional secular motivations toward more religious and theological ideologies in his 1993 article, “Holy Terror: The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by Religious Imperative.”

Because terrorism is a developmental tactic, a group's ability to easily shift from one kind of ideology to another is possible. In the 1970s, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was an ethno-nationalist and Left-leaning group wishing to secure an independent homeland for Palestinians. That ethno-nationalist and Leftist understanding of who the Palestinian people were was the predominant manifestation of politics among Palestinians for several decades. Most of the groups that represented the Palestinians were similarly varying types of Leftist-leaning and nationalistic organizations. In other words, Islam did not yet play an important role in motivating Palestinian terrorist groups.

But by 1987, a segment of the Palestinian population found their identity in the religious ideology espoused by Hamas. One should then ask, “Why was there this shift in ideology? And, in general, why has religion only recently become a significant terrorist ideology during the modern age?” Some of the responses will have a wholly local answer—others are related more generally to the geopolitical situation of the era.

**Slide 9 – Cold War Terror Politics**

Before the fall of the Soviet Union, international relations were pretty clearly organized by capitalism versus communism, the US versus the Soviet Union, West versus East, etc. Once the Soviet Union dissolved, the support structures for terrorist groups needed to evolve, and most social activist and terrorist groups tried using culturally familiar structures and ideologies to support their causes. This effective argument has been made by Anders Strindberg in Middle Eastern- or terrorism-focused journals over the last decade.
As suggested above, many of these terrorist organizations were previously distinguished by their affiliation with communism, using their leftist ideology in order to gain financial or other support from the Soviet Union; some examples (among many others) include: the Red Army Faction (RAF), the Red Brigades, or the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). In her book *The Terror Network*, Clair Sterling postulated that essentially all terrorism emanated from the Soviet Union. Though widely accepted during the Reagan administration, Sterling’s thesis has proved overly simplistic, as it does not address other motivations, such as ethnicity and religious beliefs, which are now considered to be important factors, as well. The Sterling thesis supported the grand narrative of the US versus Soviet communism, but was less accurate in identifying those movements whose motivations were deeper than Left versus Right alignments. This is now clear, as the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 has made way for other terrorist motivations, including socially constructed groups supported by religion and theology—groups the US has been targeted by in recent years. Perhaps it was politically useful at the time to align terrorism with the US’s primary state adversary, but this has proved to be less accurate in hindsight. And just as a wholesale association of terrorism with the Soviet bloc has proven to be an overly simplistic theory, so will the monolithic distinction of “religion” be broken down as time uncovers the layers of alignment and distrust between groups who we now might view as cohesive from the outside.

**Slide 10 – Religion’s Powerful Influence**

To understand religious terrorism, we need to clearly define what “religion” is and how it operates in the context of this discussion. Religion can be generally described as an organization of beliefs and worldviews in relation to a supernatural being, but because it is an evolving concept, there is no precise and universally accepted definition of it. Certainly this definitional imprecision is a constant impediment in the struggle to understand terrorism, in general; that challenge is extended further as we look to understand religious manifestations of political violence.

Socially, religion often informs a person’s understanding of who they are and their relationship to the “other.” In other words, it can be personal and collective, defining the difference between both “me” and “you,” as well as “us” and “them.”

Jonathan Fox has suggested that religion fulfills four important social functions:

- Providing a meaningful framework for understanding the world,
- Providing rules and standards of behavior that link individual actions and goals to this meaningful framework,
- Linking individuals to a greater whole, sometimes providing formal institutions which help to define and organize that whole, and,
- Possessing the ability to legitimize actions and institutions.

When considering what religion is and the role it plays in different societies, students of religious terrorism should remember that sacred texts very often provide the basis for religious beliefs. Certainly interpretation and the local environment contribute to the understanding of what the religion is ‘about,’ but members of many religions will generally point to the text as their foundation. For instance, Judaism is based on a Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew Bible—much the same text as the Old Testament of Christianity. Many of the themes (and indeed, figures) addressed in the Hebrew Bible can also be found in the Qur’an, the holy text of Islam. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are known as the “Abrahamic” religions because they all trace their lineage back to Abraham, and are primarily focused on an interpretation of their respective religious texts. In contrast, though Hinduism and Buddhism also have religious texts, they do not place the same emphasis on textual authority as the Abrahamic religions.
Slide 11 – Religion’s Powerful Influence (continued)

The major world religions are not the only ones to consider when thinking about religious terrorism, nor do religions need to be text-based in order to effectively motivate violence. Animist belief structures—such as those tribal forms found in parts of Africa, South and North America, and elsewhere—have surged in popularity in the post-Enlightenment world. The ancient neo-pagan Norse and Swedish Viking religion is still practiced, known as “Odinism” or “Asatru.” Right-wing groups have increasingly used these religions, often in a prison setting, to support racist and violent actions because they have a racial and violent focus. While the Abrahamic religions have been most commonly linked to religio us terrorism, neo-Pagan, animist, and other religious movements have also been effective in motivating religious terrorism. In these cases the religion becomes, as Bruce Hoffman has described, “a thin veneer” covering the political, ethnic and other motivations for violence that the group wishes to carry out. Thus, even without the support of sacred text, religion itself acts as a strong group identifier, drawing a distinct line between who ‘we’ are and who ‘they’ are. In this view, enemies become easily defined and identified.

Slide 12 - Interpretation

When determining a person or group’s inclination towards religious violence, interpretation is key. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are all predominantly non-violent religions. Think about the Christians, Muslims and Jews you know: are they more violent because of their religion, or less so? Chances are they are not more violent. In fact, they are likely to be less violent if they adhere to the mainstream values of their religious teachings.

The vast majority of believers in these three religions are non-violent both in textual interpretation and actual practice. Yet we have all seen pictures of members of these faiths engaged in violence that is seemingly motivated by religious belief. The issue, then, is not that people hold a strict religious belief, but that a particular interpretation of some doctrine or scriptural passage allows or encourages believers to become violent within a theological framework.

Each of the Abrahamic religions has accepted hermeneutics, or methods of interpretation, used to make doctrinal statements about their texts. A difference in hermeneutic applied to the same passage might lead one group to violence and another to passive action. As we noted earlier, we could use any of the textually-based religious traditions we have discussed to illustrate the importance of hermeneutics. As radical Islam has become a recent concern for the US, we will look at one hermeneutic accepted by some Muslim scholars, called Naskh.

Naskh simply refers to the canceling of earlier Quranic scriptures by ones composed later. The Qur’an was revealed over many years to the Prophet Muhammad and is broken into sections called “surahs.” Surahs written chronologically earlier promote peace and harmony. These surahs were written while Muhammad was militarily weak and still consolidating forces. In contrast, surahs revealed later discuss a much more forceful way of dealing with non-Muslims, including execution. One might ask how both can be absolutely true at the same time, and one answer is the use of the hermeneutic Naskh. When there is an apparent conflict in the Qur’an, earlier passages are canceled out or revised by passages written chronologically later. In this case, Naskh would suggest that although some passages in the Qur’an encourage peace with Christians and Jews, later passages allow Muslims to kill non-believers. Both the Shi’a and Sunni sects of Islam have ways of settling these apparent contradictions in the text through the use of hermeneutics. Furthermore, Islam is not alone in its reliance on hermeneutics to reconcile apparent discrepancies and contradictions its sacred text: both Christianity and Judaism employ interpretive techniques, and the use of varying hermeneutics can have drastically different—and at times, violent—implications for some religious groups.
Slide 13 – Religion vs. Theology

Clearly, textual interpretation is important when determining a group’s legitimate actions within a particular religion. But what is the difference between religion and theology, and what do each provide for a terrorist organization? One way to organize those ideas is to see that religion lends organizational structure while theology legitimizes certain actions. Religion provides a group with a common language with those they are trying to appeal to, giving the group access to a pool of people who might be more willing to accept their particular interpretation. In this way, religion becomes a baseline organization for resources, such as recruits and money. In comparison, theology justifies specific actions that a member of the religion might otherwise question. For instance, if Islam specifically forbids suicide, how do Muslim extremists justify and carry out suicide bombings? The answer is that by using a specific hermeneutic, some religious leaders have developed a theology within the religious framework of Islam that justifies suicide bombings without violating the broader prohibition to suicide. Thus, though distinct concepts, both theology and religion are important to understanding religious terrorism.

The Army of God—a Christian organization that supports the killing of abortion clinic doctors—similarly uses theological authority to justify their actions, which are generally regarded as immoral and illegal. Pastor Michael Bray uses his hermeneutic position to interpret the biblical text in a way that allows Army of God members and believers to feel justified in killing those that facilitate abortion. This position, argued in detail by Bray in his book, *A Time to Kill*, uses traditional Christian hermeneutics and requires its readers to question why or how the position is distinct from mainstream Christian theologians.

Slide 14 – The “Cosmic” Justification

Among others, Dr. Mark Juergensmeyer has argued that religious terrorism comes down to 1) conveying a message, and 2) establishing a new social or political order that fits with the group’s vision of god’s decrees. Any terrorist’s message is meant to challenge the existing order; the action of the attack intends to highlight why the government is wrong or unjust, while the attack’s message is derived from the target selected by the group. When the terrorist organization is religious or uses theology as justification, the message usually is made in a cosmic framework justifying the organization’s demands. By “cosmic,” Juergensmeyer suggests that these groups see their conflict in eschatological, apocalyptic and ultimate terms—they transcend the temporal, and intend to ultimately impact the entire world.

The terrorist group’s actions may be understood sociologically as enacting violence on the world stage in an effort to “help” people recognize the importance and ultimate “truth” of their message. The group then uses religious tradition in conjunction with their specific interpretation of both religious text and current world events to support their attacks. The control of the specific interpretation of the text with relation to surrounding events is critical.

While those outside of the terrorists’ worldview may not agree with the attacks, a group’s motives and actions are coherent within their specific interpretation. As we saw in the last section, that paradigm is generally the result of a specific hermeneutical understanding of both text and of world events. The understanding of those events, coupled with a belief about the future and perceived enemies, leads religious terrorists to believe that they have an enormously important role in cosmic events yet to come. In this regard, the hermeneutic used can be imagined as a lens through which the group or leadership view both text and events, a pre-suppositional starting point that demands the group see the text in a particular light.

Slide 15 – God as the Primary Constituent

Religious terrorists often believe themselves to be the only “righteous remnant” of their fellow believers. Because they are the only ones willing to truly sacrifice for what their version of god has called them to do, anyone who claims to be a fellow believer but is unwilling to take up arms in support of the group are considered apostate—outside of god’s will.

As discussed in the Social Identity Theory section of this series, the in-group is in some ways defined by who they are not. Thus, during the civil war in early 1980s Lebanon, though both Amal and Hezbollah were militias seeking to represent Shia, it was the two groups’ oppositional relation that came to define them. The religious nature of each group was essentially indistinguishable to those outside of Shia Islam, but internally their difference was absolute and to see the other as a fellow true believer was impossible. This issue has led to the creation and use of the term “Islamofascism”—a neologism comparing Islamic groups with European fascists of the twentieth century. In fact, the fact that the term has found political acceptance in the US is evidenced in its inclusion in the New Oxford American Dictionary.
According to Bruce Hoffman, theological justification of terrorism makes god the primary, if not only, constituent of the religious terrorist, rendering all of the terrorist’s actions justified and ordained by god. The religious terrorist sees his or her violent actions as an attempt to turn a sinful humanity back to a proper relationship with god. This means that religious terrorism is not simply a mindless attack on innocent people but an attempt to sacramentally respond to an ultimate requirement of god. Like all acts of terrorism, it is a part of a symbolic war against evil, but the in-group justification is beyond question: god has ordained the group’s use of violence.

When al-Qa’ida attacked the US on 9/11, killing nearly 3,000 people (some of whom were fellow Muslims), bin Laden and other al-Qa’ida justified the act as a way of turning the US away from actions and policies they regarded as immoral and contrary to God’s law. Al-Qa’ida’s interpretive hermeneutic provided them with a theologically defensible reason for attacking and killing Americans. Far from being “mad” or “irrational,” al-Qa’ida used a proven method to publicize their cosmic message. The people killed in the process—people we consider innocent—were guilty in al-Qaeda’s view because they were not a part of God’s cause. Their hermeneutic demanded their action—even though people from outside of the group could not comprehend the justification for their actions. At this point, the religious framework extends beyond simply being motivational: it becomes “proof” that the attackers are “justified,” and it is the framework for understanding the past, present and future. It allows an insignificant individual or small group of people to have what they believe is a much larger, and often essential, part in the turning point in history.

Slide 16 – Similar Groups – Differing Ideologies

While all religious terrorist groups justify, legitimize, and even see their attacks as commanded by God, they should not be lumped together—not even groups emerging from a common religious tradition. For instance, the Taliban, al-Qa’ida and Hezbollah are all Islamic organizations, but their use of religion and belief systems are very different. The Taliban is the Sunni-based group that ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. Under their control, Afghanistan was controlled according to the Taliban’s interpretation of Islamic principles and the Taliban leadership enforced this ethos through violence and coercion. Though the Taliban was overthrown during the US response to al-Qa’ida’s 9/11 attacks, it is still the primary enemy of the US troops in Afghanistan, operating in ungoverned regions of the country. And though most analysts would define both the Taliban and al-Qa’ida as fundamentalist Islamic groups, the Taliban’s focus was on Afghanistan alone, unlike the global vision of al-Qa’ida. This illustrates that though two groups can be characterized in a very similar way, their ideology, methods and ultimate goals can be completely different.

Like the Taliban, Hezbollah has a regional- or even state-centric focus—in Hezbollah’s case, the state is Lebanon. But unlike the Taliban, Hezbollah is Shia, not Sunni. Sunni Muslims regard Shia Muslims as apostate, so although the Taliban and Hezbollah are both radical Islamic groups, the two have very different views of their religion and how it should operate both in government and in day-to-day life. Understanding the differences between these and other groups is crucial because it makes our analysis more exact and our policies derived from that analysis more effective. In each of these cases, the respective groups have utilized the language, culture, and framework of religion to help organize, train and validate their group’s actions. Theological justification is used to help individuals overcome barriers to action while advancing the group’s greater cause. In these and other cases, religious motivation is a powerful ideology for groups, and in the modern age, only ethno-nationalism comes close to being as effective in motivating and sustaining sub-national violence.

Slide 17 - Conclusion

As we’ve seen over the course of this module, religious terrorism is an issue that, while gaining increasing attention and recognition in recent years, has a history that extends far back into the past. As students of terrorist studies, we must be able to not only approach cases of religious terrorism from an informed, critical perspective, but also situate them within their proper cultural and historical contexts. In the next module of this series, we will look more closely at examples of religious terrorism, applying the basic concepts that we have addressed here.

Slide 18 – Closing Credits

Music